

*Washington, DC* -- Congressmen Maurice Hinchey (D-NY), Rush Holt (D-NJ), and Brian Baird (D-WA) today praised President Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar for overturning a last minute decision by the Bush administration to auction off pristine public land in Utah's Colorado Plateau Wilderness to oil and gas companies. Upon the announcement of the lease sales last year, the three House members initiated a letter with 55 of their House colleagues to the Obama transition team, urging the new president to encourage his Interior Department to reverse the Bush administration's decision to lease the more than 100,000 acres of sensitive public land in Utah. The land in question was the subject of a recent court decision, which the House members praised, that placed a temporary restraining order on the controversial leases, making Salazar's announcement today possible.

"In one clean swoop, Interior Secretary Salazar erased a last minute attempt by the Bush administration to give away some of our country's most pristine land for oil and gas exploitation," Hinchey said. "I am extremely pleased to see that the Obama administration has already begun to implement a sound public lands policy that reflects the best interests of the American people, not the interests of the oil and gas industry. There is simply no justification for leasing these precious public lands in Utah at a time when oil and gas corporations have only begun producing on just over 25 percent of the 89.7 million public acres they've already leased on and offshore. This is a major step forward, but until Secretary Salazar fixes the underlying defective Resource Management Plans, the result will be more lease sales in extremely sensitive areas, including lands that will be offered at the upcoming March 24 sale in Utah."

"Today's announcement from Secretary Salazar and the Obama Administration is a most welcome one that will protect some of our nation's most cherished publicly-owned wild landscapes and unique ecosystems from the harmful effects of oil and gas drilling," Holt said. "I applaud this decision, and am encouraged that the Administration shares our commitment to preserving these beautiful lands for future generations to enjoy."

"President Bush did his level best to give one final present to the oil and gas industry before heading back to Texas, thankfully President Obama and Secretary Salazar have stopped him," said Baird. "While I proudly represent Southwest Washington, this area in Southern Utah is the land of my youth. Its beauty is stunning; its silence is deafening, and it is simply no place for an oil derrick. I look forward to finally working with an administration that believes our natural treasures should be treasured, not destroyed."

Under the direction of the Bush administration, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in December offered lease sales on more than 100,000 acres of sensitive public lands in Utah, 45,000 of which have been the subject of legislation in Congress -- the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act -- that would designate them as wilderness. The America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which Hinchey has authored since 1994, would designate as wilderness roughly 45,000 of the acres protected today along with nearly 9 million other acres of pristine land in Utah. Many of the acres that Salazar helped block from lease sales today are in close proximity to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and Dinosaur National Monument. Other parcels would negatively impact the unmatched wild nature of Desolation Canyon on the Green River, the remote Book Cliffs, as well as the world's largest outdoor art gallery -- an archaeological treasure trove known as Nine Mile Canyon.

These federal public lands were all made available to energy development with very little opportunity for public input when the Bush administration finalized new land-use management plans for the affected areas in October 2008. The three House members are continuing to press the Interior Department to revise all six of the Bush administration's land-use management plans from last November, which opened those wilderness quality lands to oil and gas development as well as off-road vehicle use.

###